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MIRRORING THE SOCIETY: A CRITICAL STUDY OF SOCIAL REALISM IN ARUNDHATI ROY'S *THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS*

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Abstract

Realism is not a direct or simple reproduction of reality but a system of conventions producing a life like illusions of some 'real' world outside the text, by process of selection, exclusion, description and manners of addressing the readers. This article explores Arundhati Roy's socio-realist aspects and ideas in a divergent manner. The book explores how the small things affect people's behaviour and their lives. In this novel Roy discloses the real identity and suppression faced by the then existed people of Kerala and Roy portrays each character in a vivid and detailed manner so that the real-world problems are clearly depicted. Inferiority complex is clearly visible in the interactions between Untouchables and Touchables in Ayemenem. Betrayal is also a constant theme in this story. Love, ideals, and confidence are all forsaken, consciously and unconsciously, innocently and maliciously, and these deceptions affect all of the characters deeply.

Keywords: Realism, Social Realism, Betrayal, Touchable and Untouchable.

Introduction

The famous Booker Prize winning Indian novelist Suzanna Arundhati Roy is one of the few Indian English writers who have actively been involved in the contemporary socio-political issues as amply evident in a number of articles, interviews and books she has written on various topics in recent years. Roy is one of those Indian writers who do not remain ensconced in the ivory tower and move in the glitter and glamour as many other literary celebrities do. Among the narrative techniques, Realism, in literature, is an approach that attempts to describe life without idealization or romantic subjectivity. Although Realism is not limited to any one century or group of writers, it is most often associated with the literary movement in 19th century France, specifically with the French novelists Flaubert and Balzac.

Realism, as a style of writing, gives the impression of recording or 'reflecting' faithfully an actual way of life. According to Samantha Lay, there is no universal, all-encompassing definition of Realism, nor is there agreement among academics and film-makers as to its purpose and use. But what we can say is there are many 'realisms and these realisms all share an interesting in presenting some aspect of life as it is lived.

Social Realism developed as a reaction against idealism and exaggerated ego encouraged by Romanticism. With a new sense of social consciousness, the social realists pledged to fight the beautiful art and style which appealed to the eye or emotions. The term "Social Realism" derives from Russian-inspired beliefs about the function of literature in a revolutionary socialist society. The international production of social realist fiction is characterized by a belief in the power of the word and in the writer's ability to portray in a satisfying documentary fashion and the structure of social reality.

The God of Small Things is a brilliant possession of Indian English Fiction articulating the pain and sufferings of the mute and the suppressed, the discarded and the downtrodden. The novel is set in the South-Western state of Kerala. It narrates the childhood experience of fraternal twins, whose lives were destroyed by the 'love laws', where in it speaks about who should be loved and in what proportion. The novel depicts how 'small things' in life affect people's lives and behaviour. The story revolves around a small town named Ayemenem, now a part of Kottayam district. The story speaks about fraternal twins Rahel and Estha from their age of seven in 1969 till they reunite when they turn to be thirty-one in 1993. Most of the story is written at the viewpoint of seven years olds. In the novel, she captured the caste system, communism, and the Syrian Christian life in Kerala. The novel opens with the story of a lady called Ammu, who desperately wants to get away from the ill-tempered father named Pappachi and finally, she gets away to stay with her aunt in Calcutta and there she marries a man named Baba. But her marriage was unsuccessful and she returns home with her children. Ammu's brother Chacko got married to an English women called Margaret and they have a daughter named Sophiemol. Apart from her mother and father, her aunt Baby Kochamma and her brother Chacko are staying with her. Velutha is VellyaPappens younger son. He is also Estha and Rahel's best friend. He is an untouchable, a Dalit who occupies the lowest social stratum. The novel revolves around these characters and the life they live and disaster that follows in their lives.



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Through the lens of Social Realism, Arundhati Roy addresses many social issues pertaining in the society. The depiction of gender discrimination, untouchability, and oppression of the downtrodden, corrupt police administration, problems and clashes of culture all are themes that fall under the mould of Social Realism. The theme of the novel is the confrontation between, ‘The Big Man’ and ‘The Small Man’. ‘The Big Man’ stands for lantern and ‘The Small Man’ stands for candle. In the novel two small persons Ammu and Velutha have to leave the world for big things. Untouchability still persists as one of the most important social issues in the contemporary society. Velutha represent the untouchable who has been since a long time exploited by society simply because he belongs to the so-called lower caste. Roy also tells that a respectable woman is called a Veshya. The relation of Ammu and Velutha is the key note of the novel that brings about catastrophe and misfortune on all. The most obvious motif of the novel is the inseparable role of sex in human life where no other factor can work. Ammu’s insignificant presence in the family and society forces her to go against dominant mainstream culture that blocks her ways of freedom and liberty. Human society is an amalgam of difference in terms of status, interest, talent and opinions because heterogeneity and diversity are the facts in human life. Through *The God of Small Things*, Roy tries to sensitize this society to the cruelty of some of its useless traditions. It describes the details regarding the changing political scene in Kerala and problems besetting woman in a male dominating society.

The God of Small Things is a realistic portrayal of the gender discrimination prevalent in the Indian society. Ammu is the central character who yearns for pleasure and happiness and for a life far from hurdles and constraints. She had to face the cruelty of her father Pappachi who used to beat her and her mother Mammachi with a brass-vase. Ammu was also deprived of higher education. Pappachi insisted that college education is an unnecessary expense for a girl, but her brother Chacko was sent to Britain for education. Arundhati Roy satirizes patriarchal oppression. According to her, woman is not a mere toy or an object of pleasure for a man to gratify his passions, but the noble stands the richest part of a man’s life. In a country like India where patriarchal system is very strong, women suffer physically, psychologically and sexually. Thus, Arundhati Roy puts under focus the deliberately constructed agencies of cruelty that work against women’s interests. All the burning problems of the society that uphold patriarchal norms and the immediate need to resolve them have been presented through the novel.

“Though Mammachi had conical corneas was already practically blind Pappachi would not help her with the pickle-making, because he did not consider pickle-making a suitable job for a high-ranking ex-Government official. He had always been a jealous man, so he greatly resented attention his wife was suddenly getting” (Roy 47).

Male supremacy reigns in Ayemenem House. The Ayemenem House is a unique house, its unique character reflects in the very structure. Roy points out the plight of women where the complex web of relationships ensnarls the women characters subjecting them to recurring suppression and quelling their individual freedom. Mammachi, mother of Ammu began her own pickle factory but her husband Pappachi objected as he saw it as an unsuitable work for the people belonging to the upper class.

The novel also gives a deep insight into problems of children in our society. Children are portrayed as the most vulnerable group requiring priority on all levels-civil, social, culture, political, etc. They need utmost support in bad times as well as in good times at familial, national and international fronts. Our constitution pledges to provide children opportunities and facilities to develop in a healthy, free and dignified way. It also asserts their protection against all sorts of exploitation. In the fourth chapter, Estha is sexually exploited by the “orange drink lemon drink man” (Roy 107). Rahel is also exploited by the society and it is evident from various instances in the novel.

Another important social issue addressed in the novel is ‘untouchability’. During colonial period many people belonging to the lower stratum of the society got converted to Christianity by European Missionaries, but the new converts were not allowed to join the Syrian Christian community and they continued to be considered as untouchables. The novel reveals that in all walks of life Velutha suffers due to the scorn and segregation of the upper-class people. Velutha along with his father used to go to Ayemenem house to deliver coconuts plucked from the trees, but they were never allowed to enter the room. They were not permitted to touch a thing that a ‘touchable’ touched. Velutha’s life runs into trouble after he gets attracted to Ammu that makes him a sort of trespasser into a touchable woman’s world and a victim of a touchable woman’s heart. Ammu and Velutha are both attracted to each other and indulge in immoral activities on the banks of the river beside the history house. Velutha, who is an Indian idol of Dalit heroism is a socially discarded, politically neglected and physically tortured character who wants to rise above his stature but is mercilessly put down to the lowly ground. He is a character who harbours in his heart a great love for Ammu and her twins. Even though he is a great expert in his work and duty he is not properly rewarded. A character that though thoroughly devoted to the cause of the party is not helped by the leader of the party Mr. Pillai. He is a character who has to suffer the scourge of untouchability and injustice. “There was nothing accidental about what happened that morning. Nothing incidental. It was no stray mugging or personal settling of scores. This was an era imprinting itself on those who lived in it”. (Roy 293).



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A major social problem described by Roy in her novel is the clash between cultures. It is a story of men and women who have been neglected and sidelined by the society and have had to pay a heavy price for being born either as an untouchable or as a woman. Ammu, a heroine of the novel violates the laws of the so-called established mainstream culture and builds a relationship with Velutha, a Parayan (untouchable). Her act of crossing the boundaries and barriers of the society is a sign of revolt against the mainstream culture. By her revolt Ammu establishes a new subculture with Velutha and breaks the norms of age-old conventional culture which is more inhuman and less accommodative. Ammu's innocent children are also marginalized and avoided by the family members of the Ayemenem house.

The primary concern of the novel itself is human relationship, particularly man-woman relationship. Arundhati Roy presents a tragic vision of life, which is a close study of the personal lives of the characters belonging to three generations of the Ayemenem House. It mainly shows that, love, which is the foundation of all other relationships remains only as an unfulfilled dream or just a fleeting experience for most of them. Familial ethics is in constant conflict with the emotional urges of the individual. Marriage, which seals the bond of love, turns out to be a social obligation which has to be lived through for the generations which vow by the family codename's mental imbalance was mainly because of her failure in marital life. Women are praised as a burden, fit to be shrugged off. The trend continues in the third generation when marriage breaks off even before it develops into a family. As Simone de Beauvoir writes,

“Marriage is not only an honourable career and one less tiring than many others: it alone permits a woman to keep her social dignity intact and at the same time to find sexual fulfilment as loved one and mother” ... (Beauvoir 62).

‘*The God of Small Things*’ is not mere production of things or events, but an expression of the social, cultural, economic and political patterns of Indian society. Though all her voices seem very vital for the present time, it is not difficult to achieve it. In fact, what she voices in her novel for the small things in society, she does it practically as a social activist. While describing the social realities, the author hopes that many of the sensitive readers of her novel may listen to her sincere voice and would join hands with her to take care of the small things which she describes in her novel. May her voice and vision for those ‘small things’ come true here, there and everywhere, so that her rebelling soul as a social activist and revolutionary spirit as a progressive writer would be satisfied seeing a new social order free from all discriminations, exploitations and inequalities.

Through this novel the novelist declares a war to fight out the social evils that have caused so much oppression to the downtrodden class. The novel problematizes the oppressive machinery based on caste-discrimination and collusion with it of certain political forces. The author shows acute sensitiveness to her surroundings which is reflected visibly in the novel. The Social Realism portrayed by the novelist, can be well understood when we analyze the social issues which have been raised in the novel.

Apart from the straightforward realistic portrayals, there are woven by the author intricate patterns by employing several stylistic devices, of remarkable aesthetic beauty that also helps the reader get into the hidden significance of the picture being presented. The passages of unparalleled verbal beauty sharpen the reader's vision of the essential realities of the lives of village folks. Her past real-life experiences and observations have profitably been employed in this novel, such as, for example, her Syrian-Christian background, the popularity of English language among them, the Kottayam coast, her mother's estranged marriage, her awareness of being unwelcome at her native place, the ancestral house, politics and caste division in Kerala. To conclude, we can say that the novel is a forceful plea for the upliftment of the downtrodden and the have-nots in Indian society.

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